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ABSTRACT

This report examines equity issues at charter schools serving predominantly minority or at-risk students. Increasing charter school enrollments of such students indicates the popularity of this choice for disadvantaged populations. Overall, charter schools enroll larger percentages of minority students than public schools. Advocates note that charter schools can revitalize deteriorating public schools and provide choice to disadvantaged families. Charter schools are generally smaller, are newly created, have a distinct curricular focus, and offer personalized learning environments. They value teacher empowerment, professional fulfillment, and innovation. Critics claim, however, that students most at risk of academic failure are being placed in untested, unregulated schools and that choice has created more deeply segregated schools than the schools from which students exited. Policymakers must create safeguards regarding charter school curriculum, recruitment, and admissions. Some states hesitate to implement charter school reform because of concerns for the lack of definitive research demonstrating effectiveness, possibilities of racial segregation, academic quality of specialized schools, and syphoning academically stronger students and students from higher socioeconomic levels. Though charter schools often enroll large numbers of underserved students, they have become more segregated than traditional schools. Some states have laws about diversity in charter school enrollment. Policymakers must be aware of culturally biased recruitment strategies. They must review the quality of charter school curricula, monitor student enrollment, and ensure that all students understand their range of options. (Contains 26 references.) (SM)

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POLICY BRIEF

MID-CONTINENT RESEARCH FOR EDUCATION AND LEARNING

Lucretia Peebles
November 2000

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MID-CONTINENT RESEARCH FOR EDUCATION AND LEARNING

Policy Brief

McREL
November 2000

Charter School Equity Issues: Focus on Minority and At-Risk Students

by Lucretia Peebles, Ph.D.

Charter schools are among the latest innovations aimed at expanding educational opportunity for our nation's students. Enthusiastically embraced by parents, the public, and politicians, the number of these schools has grown at a surprising rate since Minnesota became the first state to enact legislation allowing their implementation in 1991. A closer look, however, suggests that enthusiasm be tempered by caution. This policy brief is concerned with equity issues at charter schools that serve predominantly minority or at-risk students. The purpose of this brief is to assist policymakers in addressing these critical concerns.

Early opponents of charter schools feared they would benefit middle and upper class, mainly white students and leave behind minority and at-risk students. In many cases, the opposite has occurred: the increasing enrollment of African American, Hispanic, Native American, and at-risk students in charter schools is a strong indicator of the popularity of this form of educational choice for disadvantaged populations.

According to enrollment statistics in *The State of Charter Schools: Fourth Year Report* (U.S. Department of Education, 2000), there are approximately 1700 charter schools in the United States, serving more than 350,000 students in 36 states and the District of Columbia. Charter schools in three-fifths of these states enrolled a higher percentage of African American and Hispanic students than white students. Overall, charter schools enrolled a larger percentage of students of color than did public schools. These schools also served a "slightly higher percentage (39 percent) of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch than all public schools" in 27 charter states (p. 34).

Guidelines for policymakers

Charter school policies must ensure that

- Curricula are appropriate and effective,
- Schools with specialized curricula do not re-segregate schools,
- Minority and at-risk students are not "tracked" into vocational or non-academic schools,
- Policies targeted at achieving a certain population of underserved students do not contribute to segregation, and
- Application and admission procedures do not serve an unintentional "gatekeeping" function.

Advocates claim the numbers show that charter schools are reaching the students most in need of the unique services they offer. Critics say that we are placing our students most at-risk of academic failure into untested, unregulated schools. Furthermore, they say, "choice" has in some cases created schools that are more deeply segregated than the schools from which students exited.

This debate raises a critical question with regard to equity and the quality of the educational choices provided to these students: How might well-intentioned practices actually result in the re-segregation of our public schools and in underserved students being provided inadequate educational services? Education leaders and policymakers must negotiate between the promise of unique

educational opportunities in an era of "choice" and the risk of turning back the clock on progress made toward integration and equity in education.

Advantages outweigh disadvantages

Advocates characterize charter schools as an educational option that can revitalize a deteriorating public school system and provide choice to those who cannot afford to shop for alternatives in the private marketplace. The impetus behind the charter school movement is the belief that charter schools foster healthy competition that can "stimulate broader system improvements" (Hadderman, 1998, p.1) through the marketplace. Some view this movement as a chance to involve the larger community in redesigning public education. From an experimental perspective, charter schools serve as laboratories of reform (Hirsch, 1998) in which research-based models can be used with the intent of identifying successful, replicable educational practices. Likewise, issues of diversity, community, and choice can be closely examined in charter schools (Perreault, 1999).

Teacher empowerment and professional fulfillment are often highly valued in charter schools...

Charter schools are generally smaller (often with fewer than 200 students), are newly created, have a distinct curricular focus and offer more personalized learning and social environments than regular public schools. Parents who are dissatisfied with the educational quality of their schools often find that charter schools offer new options, e.g., smaller classes and schools, culturally-relevant curricula, higher standards, and safety for their children. Greater academic gains shown by some students have been attributed to their involvement in charter schools (Hirsch, 1998). In California, Colorado, and Minnesota charter schools have had their contracts renewed because they "produced measurable achievement gains, including that of students from low-income families" (Hadderman, 1998).

For some parents, improved educational opportunity takes precedence over diversity.

Teacher empowerment and professional fulfillment are often highly valued in charter schools and in many schools teachers are encouraged or permitted to use innovative instructional methods (Hadderman, 1998). For example, Finn et al. report that 78 percent of California's charter schools are experimenting with new instructional strategies. A 1998 National Education Association study found high satisfaction and morale as well as relative autonomy in the classroom to be significant incentives for teachers to work at charter schools (Manno et al., 2000, p. 738). For students who have experienced academic or social difficulty in their regular public schools, the innovative approaches of a charter school might promote achievement.

Advocates contend, therefore, that while much is to be learned about the long-term results of charter schools, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages for minority and at-risk students. Because traditional public schools have not worked for large numbers of these students, innovative approaches, even those that are untested, might offer the best possibility of success. Finally, they argue that use of the word "re-segregation" by critics of charter schools is disingenuous; parents and students choose to attend charter schools. For some parents, improved educational opportunity takes precedence over diversity.

Policymakers must create safeguards

While policymakers and school officials must grapple with a host of charter school equity issues, concerns fall into two primary categories:

Curricular concerns

- How can we ensure that curricula are appropriate and effective?
- How can we ensure that schools with specialized curricula (e.g., Afrocentric academies) do not re-segregate our schools?
- How can we ensure that minority and at-risk students are not "tracked" into vocational or non-academic charter schools?

Recruitment and admissions concerns

- How can we ensure that policies targeted at achieving a certain population of underserved students do not contribute to segregation?
- How can we ensure that application and admission procedures do not serve an unintentional "gatekeeping" function?

It is critical in this first decade of charter schools that attention be paid to mechanisms which may unintentionally further segregate students and undermine efforts to improve their quality of education.

Specialized curricula have inherent risks

Some states have been reluctant to implement charter school reform in part because "a number of incompletes still remain on the charter school report card" (Hirsch, 1998, p. 21). One of the most frequently cited concerns is the lack of "definitive research demonstrating the effectiveness of these schools" (Hirsch, p. 21). Research has tended to focus more on the students who attend these schools than on the level of success that charter schools are experiencing (Hirsch, p. 21). Thus, critics contend, students most at-risk of academic failure may be subject to educational practices of questionable merit.

In addition, the racial and cultural orientation of the charter school developers influences the racial composition of the student population. According to Brown (1999), "most charter schools reflect the racial and ethnic makeup of their organizers and local community" (p. 480). Consequently, charter schools with racially or culturally-specific curricula attract predominately African American, Hispanic or Native American populations. In effect, the curricula could serve as an additional segregating mechanism. While this may work to the advantage of students who have been underserved in traditional classrooms, it raises the specter of "separate but equal" determined by the Supreme Court in *Brown v. the Board of Education* to be unconstitutional.

> *It is critical...that attention be paid to mechanisms which may unintentionally further segregate students and undermine efforts to improve their quality of education.*

Particularly alarming is research that shows the racial and ethnic distribution of students of color is disproportionately higher in those charter schools that have vocational, nonacademic, or culturally-specific curricula, and disproportionately lower in regular and academic charter schools (Cobb & Glass, 1999). What was envisioned as an equalizing mechanism may, according to one researcher, be "furthering racial and economic isolation" (Bowman, 2000b, p. 6).

Finally, at a time when standards-based education is prominent on the agendas of many states throughout the nation, some critics question the academic quality of specialized charter schools that focus on nonacademic or culturally specialized curricula in lieu of state standards and curricula (Wells et al., 1999). Students might not gain the skills and content knowledge necessary to earn proficiency on high stakes tests, which may seriously limit their post-secondary options.

Enrollment impacts diversity in surprising ways

Another argument frequently levied against charter schools is that they "cream off" academically stronger students and students from families with higher socioeconomic levels, leaving behind low-income and academically challenged students. While this has occurred in some cases, charter schools often enroll larger numbers of underserved students. In both cases, however, schools have become more racially and ethnically segregated than the traditional schools from which these students exited.

Charter legislation mandating that schools target specific populations for enrollment may contribute to the problem. Approximately one-third of the charter schools in this nation were opened in order to serve those students considered most at risk of academic failure (Bowman, 2000a). In many states, charter school laws require or give preference to proposals for schools that will serve "at-risk students" (Vergari, 1999). The intent is to reach students who are typically underserved in regular school environments; the danger lies in the potential for creating dual school systems.

...the danger lies in the potential for creating dual school systems.

Several states (for example, California and Colorado) do have laws requiring the enrollment in charter schools to reflect the demographics of the neighborhood or district (Dittmar, Torres, and Weiser, 1995), though Brown (1999) notes that these laws are not always enforced. For example, in 10 of the 17 California charter schools studied by Wells et al. (1998), "at least one racial or ethnic group was either over-represented or under-represented by 15 percent or more" (p. 18). Apart from conducting a yearly student enrollment census to determine budgetary allocations based upon actual student attendance, enrollment is not closely scrutinized by chartering authorities. It may be difficult, therefore, to determine whether recruitment and enrollment are adhering to both the letter and the spirit of the charter school legislation.

The application process itself may serve an unintentional gatekeeping function.

At the local level, policymakers must be aware that recruitment strategies might be culturally biased, limiting enrollment to parents who are educated, familiar with the educational system, and respond well to written communication. While in some cases application procedures for charter schools are identical to those of regular public schools, some charter schools require additional paperwork. In addition, admission practices that admit students on a first-come, first-served basis create a serious barrier for some families who have limited access to information about the school, its admission criteria, and the curricula. Consequently, the application process itself may serve an unintentional gatekeeping function.

Finally, while proponents view charter schools' small size as a strength, opponents feel that the small size of charter schools and their limited number provides "choice" for only some families, raising concerns about fairness and equity.

Policy can balance autonomy and accountability

Minority students are served disproportionately by charter schools in some districts and states in part because their academic and social needs have not been adequately met by traditional public schools. Often these students have sought opportunities in charter schools hoping to improve their academic performance. Therefore, local policymakers should review the quality of the curricula offered in charter schools in general, paying particular attention to those schools that cater to specific populations. Local policymakers should ascertain whether the

curricula are aligned with state standards and if, upon graduation, students will be afforded opportunities to pursue a variety of post secondary options.

Policymakers at state and local levels must closely monitor the enrollment of students in order to identify any unusual patterns that might have a negative effect on students and their communities. If enrollment patterns in school districts or particular communities indicate that students of color and underserved students are being segregated mainly into nonacademic and vocational schools, state and local policymakers should seek to initiate a policy of controlled choice. Such a policy would maintain the balance in these schools to reflect the demographics of the school district, ensuring that all students and families are served equitably.

Policymakers must also ensure that all students are made aware of the range of options open to them and provide equal access to these options. The Office of Civil Rights recommends that efforts be made to reach all parent groups in the community, even if it requires providing written materials in their primary language, translators, and special attention to the recruitment of minority and limited-English-proficient students (NWREL, 1998, p. 5).

Policymakers must also ensure that all students are made aware of the range of options open to them and provide equal access to these options.

Some states (e.g., Minnesota, Iowa, and Washington) have open enrollment policies that permit students to enroll in educational programs outside of their neighborhood attendance boundaries. These policies broaden the educational options for students and could significantly affect a school's demographics. According to a 1999 report from the Center for Education Reform, "eighteen states have adopted choice plans that give children rights to enroll in public schools outside their district of residence" (cited in Sugarman & Kemerer, 1999, p. 21).

Cooperative agreements between districts or schools offer additional opportunities for diversification. The Odyssey Expeditionary Learning Charter School negotiated an innovative contractual arrangement with Denver Public Schools which permits it to remain in northeast Denver to become a part of a new educational park. Here it will share facilities and amenities with a traditional public school. This effort represents a unique partnership between a charter school and its chartering authority that will benefit students and families in the northeast quadrant of the city.

Accountability may be the strongest means of ensuring academic quality for charter school students.

Various transportation options should be explored by state and local school districts in an effort to diversify charter school populations. In New York, where there are a great many charter schools, state law requires that districts provide transportation for charter school students. Charter schools in several other states (e.g., Georgia and Idaho), can receive transportation support from their school districts. Local and state policymakers must consider the impact that transportation might have on students who seek educational options beyond their neighborhood. They might seek information on fund allocations to discern whether transportation might be included in a manner similar to which magnet schools are funded, to assist charter schools in attracting a diversified population of students.

Finally, the very premise of charter schools is that they are granted relative autonomy in return for accountability; traditional public schools are not always held accountable for achievement in this same manner (Hirsch, 1998). Accountability, however, takes widely different forms and is not always strictly monitored or enforced. Accountability may be the strongest means of

ensuring academic quality for charter school students. A school's charter must clearly define appropriate measures and timeframes within which goals must be reached, and the school must be held accountable for meeting these goals.

Conclusion

It is tempting to view charter schools as a simple solution to the complex problems faced by public schools. They come, however, with their own set of difficulties and pitfalls, particularly with regard to the fundamental issue of "equity" upon which our public education system is predicated.

Research indicates that this form of educational choice is particularly appealing to disadvantaged populations, but that there are inherent dangers. Curricula must be appropriate and effective and guard against the possibility of encouraging segregation — even if it is voluntary. Application and admissions procedures must be equitable as well. If these issues are neglected or not recognized, charter schools will fall short of fulfilling their promise: To be truly successful, school choice must contribute to a continued quest to improve educational opportunity for all.

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Online Resources

U.S. Department of Education
http://www.uscharterschools.org

Northwest Regional Education Laboratory
http://www.nwrel.org/charter/index.html

Center on Reinventing Public Education
http://www.crpe.org/CharterSchools/charterschools.html

National Education Association
http://www.nea.org/issues/charter

Center for School Change
http://www.hhh.umn.edu/centers/school-change

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